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ABSTRACT

Although much has been said about the influence of reading upon writing, little information is available concerning the effect of writing practice upon reading comprehension. During one experimental study, college freshmen students in a remedial reading course wrote in the expressive mode for ten minutes a day. This simple act of writing, without writing instruction, improved their reading comprehension, their attitudes toward instruction, and their feelings about themselves as readers, writers, and learners. Expressive writing enabled the students to see relationships, connections, and ideas that were once elusive and abstract. By writing, students were able to organize their thinking on paper and were in a better position to understand another writer's organization of an idea. This is what reading comprehension is all about. To enhance the transfer of learning between reading and writing classes, students should see the connection between what an author is saying and what the writer wants to say. If knowledge gained from writing in the expressive mode can transfer to reading comprehension and can make students feel better about themselves as readers and writers, then they may also increase their cognitive growth through the transfer of learning and the shared processes among reading, writing, and thinking. (HOD)

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The Use of Writing to Improve Reading Comprehension

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C. COLLINS

THE USE OF WRITING TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION

ALTHOUGH MUCH HAS BEEN SAID ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF READING UPON WRITING, LITTLE INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE ABOUT THE EFFECT OF WRITING PRACTICE UPON READING COMPREHENSION.

I'D LIKE TO TELL YOU ABOUT A STUDY IN WHICH A GROUP OF STUDENTS IN A READING COURSE WROTE FOR TEN MINUTES A DAY, AND HOW THE SIMPLE ACT OF WRITING, WITHOUT WRITING INSTRUCTION, IMPROVED THEIR READING COMPREHENSION, THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD INSTRUCTION, AND THEIR FEELINGS ABOUT THEMSELVES AS READERS, WRITERS, AND LEARNERS.

THE STUDY HAS A NUMBER OF IMPLICATIONS FOR US AS TEACHERS OF ENGLISH:

1. IT SHOWS THE IMPACT OF WRITING ON ONE COGNITIVE ACTIVITY -- READING

2. IT TELLS US SOMETHING MORE ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READING AND WRITING

3. IT PROVIDES US WITH A POWERFUL TEACHING TOOL THAT IS READILY AVAILABLE TO US AND TO OUR STUDENTS

4. IT IS A TECHNIQUE WHICH CAN BE USED AT ANY LEVEL OF INSTRUCTION

THE NOTION THAT STUDENTS WHO PRACTICED WRITING MIGHT IMPROVE IN READING WAS THE HYPOTHESIS OF MY EXPERIMENTAL STUDY.

ABOUT 70 PROBATIONARY FRESHMEN WHO TESTED POORLY IN READING, AND WHO WERE ON THE BORDER OF FLUNKING OUT OF COLLEGE AFTER FIRST SEMESTER, WERE REQUIRED TO TAKE A READING COURSE.

HALF THE GROUP WAS TAUGHT READING IN THE TRADITIONAL WAY, AS A CONTROL, WHILE THE OTHER HALF WAS TAUGHT READING IN THE SAME WAY, BUT WITH THE ADDITION OF DAILY WRITING PRACTICE.

HAVE YOU EVER ATTEMPTED TO EXPLAIN TO STUDENTS IN A READING CLASS THAT THEY WOULD BE WRITING EVERY DAY?

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED THEIR EXPRESSIONS WHEN YOU SAY

-- YOU WILL NOT GRADE THE PAPERS

--YOU WILL NOT CORRECT GRAMMAR OR SPELLING

-- YOU WILL NOT USE A RED PENCIL

THEY TEND TO LOOK AT YOU....STRANGELY....

PARTICULARLY, WHEN YOU SAY THAT FOR THE MOST PART,

--YOU WILL NOT BE ASSIGNING TOPICS.

"YOU MEAN... WRITE ABOUT ANYTHING?"

"YES. I JUST WANT TO HEAR WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY."

WEIRD!

I SAW MY STUDENTS ONLY TWICE A WEEK ... BUT BEGAN ON THAT VERY FIRST DAY HAVING THEM WRITE FOR TEN MINUTES, AND I ASKED THEM TO WRITE ABOUT WRITING...HOW THEY FELT ABOUT IT... IF THEY LIKED IT, OR LOOKED AT IT AS A CHORE...HOW MUCH WRITING THEY WERE IN THE HABIT OF DOING...

THAT FIRST NIGHT, I TOOK HOME THE PAPERS, AND FOUND THAT MANY OF THEIR RESPONSES REVEALED A STRONG AND DEEP SENSE OF FAILURE AS WRITERS:

-- I CAN'T WRITE BECAUSE I NEVER KNOW WHAT TO SAY

-- I DON'T EXPRESS MYSELF WELL; I'M NOT CREATIVE

-- I'VE GOT REALLY POOR GRAMMAR; I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO PUT COMMAS

-- I'M A TERRIBLE SPELLER; WRITING HAS ALWAYS BEEN HARD FOR ME

THEY HAD SO LITTLE CONFIDENCE IN THEMSELVES, AS WRITERS.

AS I READ THE PAPERS,

I WROTE A SENTENCE OR TWO IN RESPONSE TO EACH OF THE 35 STUDENTS IN MY TWO SECTIONS...MY RESPONSE WAS MUCH THE SAME AS A RESPONSE TO A LETTER... IN MANY CASES, THAT FIRST EVENING, I SIMPLY SAID I HOPED THE COURSE WOULD MAKE THEM FEEL BETTER ABOUT WRITING.

I WROTE IN BLUE OR BLACK INK, A FEW SPACES BELOW THE LAST LINE OF THE STUDENT'S TEXT. LATER ON, I EVEN USED A RED PEN...JUST TO PROVE THAT ONCE IN A TEACHER'S HAND, IT DOESN'T AUTOMATICALLY JUMP ALL OVER THE PAPER.

AT FIRST, SOME STUDENTS FINISHED WRITING IN LESS THAN TEN MINUTES; BUT BEFORE LONG IT BECAME AN EFFORT TO GET THEM TO STOP WRITING.

THEY HAD SO MUCH TO SAY, AND THEY WROTE ABOUT THINGS WHICH REALLY MATTERED TO THEM: THEIR ACADEMIC PROBLEMS; THEIR FAMILIES; HOMESICKNESS; THE TERRIBLE FOOD SERVED AT THE COMMONS; FRIENDS THEY CARED ABOUT, OR COULD NOT GET ALONG WITH; DEATH AND DYING; AND THEIR LEISURE-TIME ACTIVITIES.

STUDENTS CAME TO THE READING CLASS EARLY AND SILENTLY.

THE CLASSROOM HAD BECOME AN OASIS .... A BRIEF MOMENT OF SEPARATION AND ALONENESS, YET AT THE SAME TIME, A MOMENT OF SHARING, OF MAKING CONTACT WITH ANOTHER PERSON.

I TOO, GREETED THEM SILENTLY AS THEY TOOK THE RULED PAPER FROM MY DESK. EACH PERIOD, MY FIRST WORDS TO THEM WERE:

"PLEASE BEGIN TO THINK ABOUT A CONCLUSION FOR TODAY'S WRITING.... THERE ARE ONLY TWO MINUTES REMAINING."

AND AFTER TWO MINUTES PASSED, I WOULD COLLECT THE PAPERS.

THERE WAS NO FURTHER DISCUSSION... AND THEY KNEW I WOULD RETURN THEM AT THE NEXT SESSION.

10 MINUTES OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING ....WHY SHOULD IT HAVE AN EFFECT ON READING COMPREHENSION AND ATTITUDES?

ONE EXPLANATION MIGHT BE THE NATURE OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING, ITSELF; ANOTHER WOULD SUPPORT THE NOTION THAT READING AND WRITING ARE THEMSELVES, INTIMATELY RELATED.

THERE IS A GROWING BODY OF RESEARCH INTO THIS RELATIONSHIP. MORE THAN ENOUGH DATA HAVE BEEN COLLECTED WHICH FIND POOR READERS WITH PARALLEL WRITING PROBLEMS (HILDRETH, 1948; LUNSFORD, 1978), WHICH SHOW READING ENHANCING WRITING SKILL, AND WHICH SUGGEST THAT KNOWLEDGE OF ONE IS A VALID PREDICTOR OF THE OTHER. OTHER STUDIES SHOW THAT WE BEST LEARN TO READ BY READING AND TO WRITE BY WRITING.

...BUT TO LEARN TO READ BY WRITING?..BY EXPRESSIVE WRITING, NO LESS, THE KIND OF WRITING ONE MIGHT USE IN A JOURNAL OR A LETTER, OR IN ORDINARY CONVERSATION?

BRITTON DEFINES EXPRESSIVE WRITING AS:

"LANGUAGE CLOSE TO THE SELF"

"LOOSELY STRUCTURED BECAUSE IT FOLLOWS THE CONTOURS OF THE SPEAKER'S PREOCCUPATIONS"

THE LANGUAGE "IN WHICH WE FIRST-DRAFT MOST OF OUR IMPORTANT IDEAS"

BRITTON GOES ON TO SAY THAT STUDENTS WHO WRITE IN THE EXPRESSIVE MODE SIMPLY ARE SHARING THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH US. YET, IN HIS LONGTITUDINAL STUDY IN GREAT BRITAIN, HE FOUND ONLY 1/2 OF 1 % OF THE SAMPLES OF SCHOOL WRITING WERE WRITTEN IN THE EXPRESSIVE MODE. SCHOOL WRITING IN GENERAL, CONCENTRATED ON ANALYTICAL, TRANSACTIONAL OR EXPOSITORY MODES.

KINNEAVY SUGGESTS THAT THE EXPRESSIVE MODE OF WRITING IS PRIOR TO OTHER USES OF LANGUAGE BECAUSE IT GIVES PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE TO THE WRITER FOR PURPOSES OF REFLECTION AND UNDERSTANDING.

GRAVES PUTS IT ANOTHER WAY WHEN HE SAYS THAT STUDENTS WHO ARE PERMITTED TO WRITE EXPRESSIVELY IN THE CLASSROOM ARE GIVEN AN IMPLICIT MESSAGE...THAT STUDENTS HAVE SOMETHING WORTHWHILE TO SAY.

OTHER PROPONENTS OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING HAVE SAID THAT THE EXPERIENCE IS A FREEING ONE FOR MOST STUDENTS:

--THEY ARE FREED FROM THE FEAR OF WRITING

--FREED FROM THEIR LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN THEIR WRITING

--FREED FROM A LACK OF FLUENCY WITH WRITTEN LANGUAGE

THE IDEA THAT WRITING BRINGS ORDER AND UNDERSTANDING AND MEANING TO ONE'S THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES IS ANOTHER WAY OF SAYING THAT WRITING PROCESSES INTERNAL INFORMATION, MAKES IT EXTERNAL, AND HOLDS IT IN GRAPHIC RELIEF FOR REFLECTION AND LEARNING. IT IS A WAY OF PROCESSING PERSONAL THOUGHTS, BELIEFS, AND DOUBTS.

STUDENTS WHO WRITE EXPRESSIVELY ARE THINKING ON PAPER.

THEY BEGIN TO SEE RELATIONSHIPS, CONNECTIONS, AND IDEAS WHICH ONCE WERE ELUSIVE AND ABSTRACT.

THEIR CONVICTIONS ARE STRENGTHENED.

THEY DEVELOP A STRONGER SENSE OF SELF, AN INCREASED CONFIDENCE AS LEARNERS, A DECREASED SENSE OF FAILURE.

MOST IMPORTANT: STUDENTS WHO ARE ABLE TO ORGANIZE THEIR THINKING ON PAPER...ARE IN A BETTER POSITION TO UNDERSTAND ANOTHER WRITER'S ORGANIZATION OF IDEAS.

THIS IS WHAT READING COMPREHENSION IS ALL ABOUT.

LET'S TAKE IT ONE STEP FURTHER... IF KNOWLEDGE GAINED FROM WRITING IN THE EXPRESSIVE MODE CAN TRANSFER TO READING COMPREHENSION, AND CAN MAKE STUDENTS FEEL BETTER ABOUT THEMSELVES AS READERS AND WRITERS, MAY WE NOT EXPECT EVEN MORE COGNITIVE GROWTH IF WE COULD POINT TO THE ELEMENTS OF TRANSFER, AND TO THE SHARED PROCESSES AMONG READING, WRITING, AND THINKING?

TRANSFER OF LEARNING IS SAID TO OCCUR WHEN ELEMENTS TO BE TRANSFERRED ARE SIMILAR. FURTHERMORE, LANGUAGE IS THE MEDIUM THROUGH WHICH KNOWLEDGE IS TRANSFERRED (ELLIS, 1965; SANDIFORD, 1963; THORNDIKE, 1963). IF THIS IS TRUE, IS IT NOT REASONABLE TO ASSUME THAT LANGUAGE AND ITS USES CAN, THEMSELVES, BECOME ELEMENTS OF TRANSFER?

THEORY HOLDS THAT WHEN STUDENTS ARE MADE AWARE OF THE PROCESS OF TRANSFER, AND WHEN ELEMENTS OF TRANSFER ARE POINTED OUT, TRANSFER OF LEARNING IS MORE LIKELY TO OCCUR.

IN OTHER WORDS, UNLESS A CONNECTION OR RELATIONSHIP IS MADE EVIDENT, IT MAY OR MAY NOT BE PERCEIVED BY THE LEARNER. EVEN MATURE LEARNERS TEND TO COMPARTMENTALIZE INFORMATION AND INSTRUCTION, PARTICULARLY WHEN THERE IS LITTLE TIME AVAILABLE FOR REFLECTION.

STUDENTS TAUGHT READING IN ONE CLASSROOM AND WRITING IN ANOTHER, SOMETIMES ON THE SAME DAY, MOVE FROM A READING LESSON ON MAIN IDEA TO A WRITING SESSION ON THESIS STATEMENT, AND NEVER SEE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WHAT AN AUTHOR IS SAYING, AND WHAT THE STUDENT IS PLANNING TO SAY.

AS EDUCATORS, WE CANNOT LEAVE TRANSFER OR CONNECTION-MAKING TO CHANCE. IN THE CLASSROOM WHEN WE POINT TO CONNECTING LINKS OR DIFFERENCES, STUDENTS BEGIN TO MAKE CONCEPTUAL BRIDGES AMONG IDEAS....BRIDGES WHICH ARE ESSENTIAL TO AUTHENTIC LEARNING.

- ONE WAY TO ENHANCE TRANSFER IS TO SHOW STUDENTS THAT READING AND WRITING ARE PARALLEL PROCESSES, CLOSELY RELATED TO THINKING.

- SECONDLY, IF EXPRESSIVE WRITING IS A WAY OF LEARNING, IT SHOULD BECOME A NATURAL PART OF INSTRUCTION IN BOTH READING AND WRITING.

- THIRDLY, IF STUDENTS ARE TO MOVE FREELY AND ACTIVELY AMONG THE ROLES OF READER, THINKER, AND WRITER, WRITING AND READING INSTRUCTION MUST BE INTEGRATED.

BUT, HOW CAN WE PUT THESE THEORIES INTO PRACTICE?

THE DIAGRAM SHOWING THE INTERRELATIONSHIPS AMONG READING, THINKING, AND WRITING DESCRIBES ONE WAY OF COMBINING THEORY, PROCESS, AND PRACTICE:

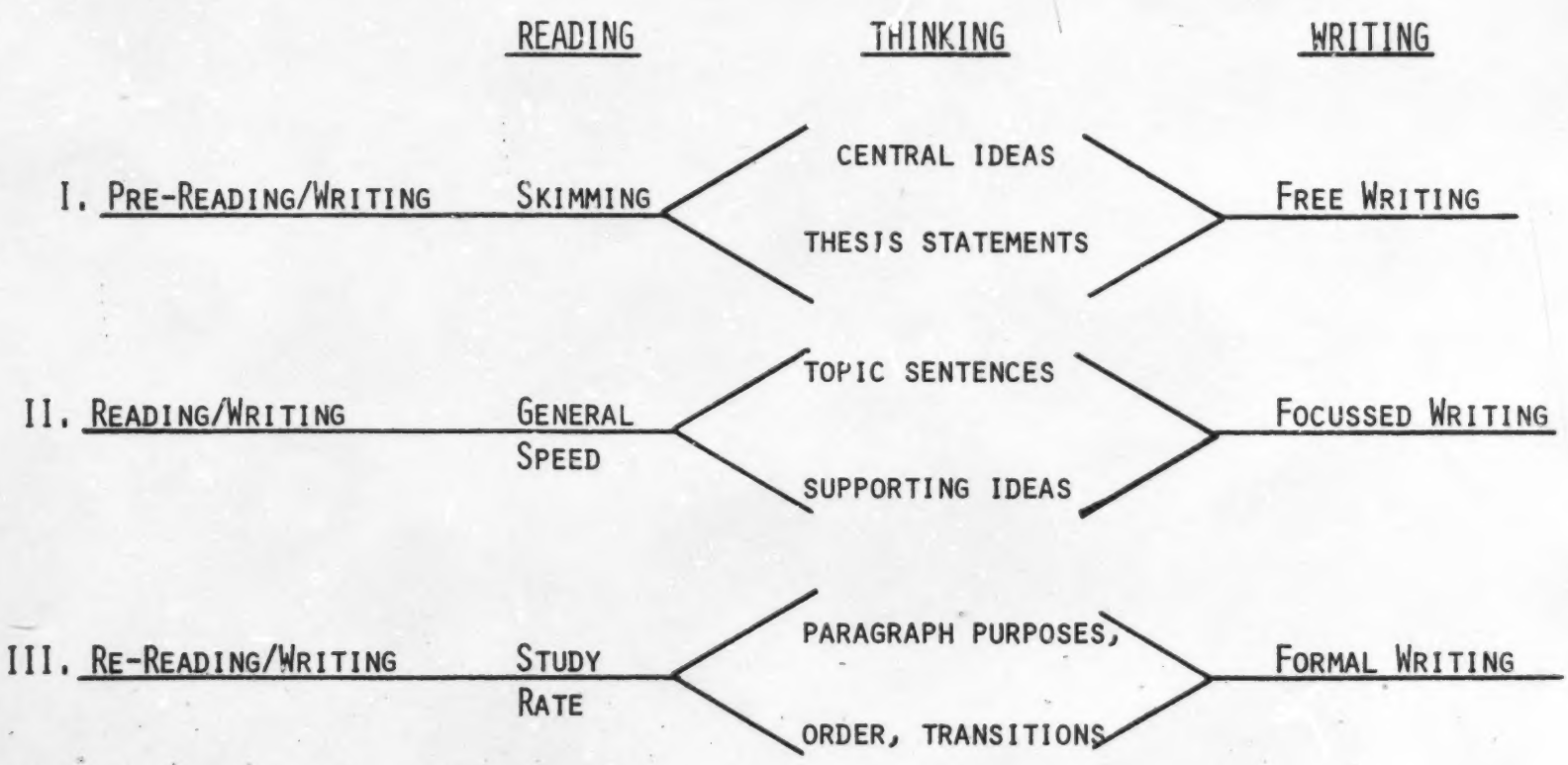
INSERT DIAGRAM HERE

RE[illegible]ING AND WRITING AS PARALLEL PROCESSES ARE SHOWN IN THE THREE PHASES: I. PRE-READING/WRITING; II. READING/WRITING; III. RE-READING/WRITING. THE DIAGRAM SHOWS HOW THE TWO PROCESSES OF READING AND WRITING ARE RELATED TO THINKING AND TO THE PURPOSES OF READER AND WRITER IN COMPREHENDING AND COMPOSING.

PHASE ONE: PRE-READING/WRITING, COVERS THE PREPARATION STAGES OF READING AND WRITING. IT EXAMINES THE KINDS OF THINKING ASSOCIATED WITH SKIMMING A TEXT TO COMPREHEND CENTRAL IDEAS AND AUTHOR'S THESIS -- AND SKIMMING THE MIND TO GENERATE CENTRAL IDEAS AND THESIS FOR AN ORIGINAL ESSAY.

THE PURPOSES OF PHASE ONE ARE TO GAIN A PRELIMINARY VIEW OF A WRITTEN TEXT, TO MAKE PRELIMINARY DECISIONS ABOUT AN ORIGINAL TOPIC, AND TO GET A CENTRAL PERSPECTIVE ON A CONTINUUM OF EVENTS.

Interrelationships Among Analytical Reading, Thinking, Writing



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PHASE TWO: READING/WRITING, COVERS THE CLOSER READING OF A TEXT AND THE FOCUSSED WRITING OF A FIRST DRAFT. IT DEALS WITH UNDERSTANDING HIERARCHIES OF IDEAS, RELATIONSHIPS AMONG CONCEPTS, AND ORDERING OF CENTRAL AND SUPPORTING IDEAS.

THE PURPOSES OF PHASE TWO ARE TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT A WRITTEN TEXT AND TO WRITE A FIRST DRAFT CONTAINING BOTH CENTRAL IDEAS AND SUPPORTING DETAILS.

PHASE THREE: RE-READING/WRITING, COVERS THE RE-READING OF A TEXT AND THE RE-WRITING OF A DRAFT. IT DEALS WITH THE CLARIFICATION OF LEVELS, ORDER, PURPOSE, AND SEQUENCE OF IDEAS.

THE PURPOSES OF PHASE THREE ARE TO VERIFY MEANING AND INTENT OF A TEXT, AND TO CLEARLY COMBINE IDEAS INTO COHERENT WHOLES.

IMPLICIT THROUGHOUT IS THE ASSUMPTION THAT THE THINKING PROCESSES WHICH UNDERLIE THE WRITING OF A TEXT COMPLEMENT THE READER'S RECEPTION OF THE MATERIAL IF THE READER IS AWARE OF THE RELATIONSHIP. CONVERSELY, THE THINKING PROCESSES WHICH UNDERLIE THE READING OF A TEXT COMPLEMENT THE WRITER'S GENERATION OF ORIGINAL MATERIAL IF THE WRITER IS AWARE OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TWO.

FINALLY, THE ASSUMPTION GROWS IN POWER AND EFFECTIVENESS WHEN READER AND WRITER ARE ONE, AND STUDENTS BECOME AWARE OF THE INTERRELATIONSHIPS AMONG THEIR OWN PROCESSES OF READING, WRITING, AND THINKING.

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